Manchester Contradicted On Kennedy Bodyguards

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New York neurologists today disputed William Manchester's contention that President Kennedy's life might have been saved if his bodyguards had been younger.

In his book, "Death of a President," Manchester said that "five terrible seconds" might have meant the difference between life and death when Kennedy was shot in Dallas.

The two bodyguards riding in the front seat of the presidential limousine were 54 and 48 years old, Manchester said, and their reflexes "were crucial in those seconds after the first shot was fired." Kennedy was wounded by the first shot and killed by the second shot, which was fired five seconds later.

Manchester wrote of the two agents:

"They were in a position to take evasive action after the seconds, they were immobilized."

But New York neurologists, who declined to be named, said the agents' age was "a negligible factor" in their reaction time.

"Reflexes are so fast in the ideal circumstances of laboratory conditions that the difference imposed by age is minor compared to that imposed by the mere factor of surprise," one doctor said. He added:

"It's hard to imagine that even a 25-year-old marine sergeant riding in the front seat could assess the fact that the shot came from five stories up in five seconds and take action to protect the president."

Reflexes do slow down somewhat with age, the neurologist said, but the difference is measured only in tenths of seconds.

"Whatever minor change might occur in reaction time with age is more than compensated for by training and experience in intelligent action," the doctor said.